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ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

MRS. ANNA TOMASTICK

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INTERVIEWEE: Mrs. Andrew Tomastick

INTERVIEWER: Ms. Rose Ann Sochan

INTERVIEWER: This is an interview with Mrs. Anna Tomastick for the Joliet Junior College Oral History Program by Rose Ann Sochan at Mrs. Tomastick's house in Joliet, Illinois on January 27, 1974 at 11:30 A.M.

SOCHAN: Mrs. Tomastick, tell me where and when you were born.

TOMASTICK: I was born January 17, 1886, in Central City--a suburb of Braceville, Illinois--a small farming and coal-mining community in Grundy County, bordering Will County. My parents had twelve children, seven girls and five boys, of whom only two remain--I, the oldest, age 88; and my youngest sister, 65 years old.

SOCHAN: Tell me a little about what it was like back then and the happenings.

TOMASTICK: Those early years of the horse-and-buggy era were of peace and friendliness for the hard-working laborers. There were the bare necessities of life. It was the age of kerosene lamps and lighting, and coal and wood-burning stoves for cooking and heating, and no indoor plumbing.

SOCHAN: Tell me a little about the type of schooling you had and your education.

TOMASTICK: I attended the small, one-room village grade school. The village had one store called The Company Store which was owned by the coal mine. This general store provided all of the essentials of the coal-mining people--food, clothing, and mining supplies for the miners. Here

the miners bought their work caps with little carbide lamps, or light, at the front of the caps, which provided light in the darkness. I remember, when my mother paid the weekly bill, the storekeeper would give her a number of yards of fabric for clothing and a bag of candy for me. A Mrs. Jones sold candy and a few small items in the front room of her home. My mother would send me to her place to buy one penny's worth of yeast for the family's homemade bread making. In those days five cents' worth of meat would supply the family's need for one meal. The homemade ice cream sales at one of the small churches in Central City was another treat for me. I remember walking to Braidwood church with my father, a distance of more than three miles. In those years the mining conditions were very dangerous and unhealthful.

SOCHAN: Now we know that your father was a miner. Tell me about the type of wages that he received.

TOMASTICK: My sturdy, six-foot father had soon become a stooped and aging man, working in the low, damp mine twelve hours daily for about two dollars per day. Land agents talked to many of those miners with the prospect of Minnesota farmland..... The Chicago World's Fair, also called the Columbian Exposition, was in 1893 and 1894. My parents moved to the rural section of Lakefield, Minnesota in the early spring of 1894. At that time I was eight years of age, the oldest of the young family of then four children--the youngest being three months old. We went by train from Braceville. At the same time another family, friends of my parents, moved with us to the same country section. Our small amount of household furniture plus one cow, dog, and chickens were transported by freight. We arrived to a flat, treeless prairie, bitterly cold and unsheltered those

first rugged winters. That first winter we lived in a vacant, crude, one-room building on the property. Later that summer a small house was built, and added to throughout the years. Here my parents and the growing family tilled the beautiful, virgin land, beginning with oxen the early years. Much later, the acreage increased to 320 acres and the family to 12 children. My growing brothers farmed the land with tractors and all the other necessary farming machinery as these became available in later years.

SOCHAN: What type of recreational or social events did you enjoy as a child?

TOMASTICK: We children loved the winterlong, deep snow banks in the clear, clean, crisp air. Winter and summer the sky was beautiful. In the summer the fields were filled with many different kinds of beautiful wild flowers and birds. As my brothers grew older, they enjoyed hunting and fishing. The streams and rivers and lakes were pure and clean. My schooling did not go beyond the rural, one-room, country grade school, where we walked to and from daily--except for the time the farming children were excused during the busy planting and harvesting seasons. Being the oldest in the family, I helped with the care of my brothers and sisters, with the canning and baking and cooking, with the house and garden work, and did most of the sewing of their clothing. My younger brothers and sisters attended the high school in the town of Lakefield. Although each child had his own responsibilities, there was also time for fun and play with one another, with the neighboring farm children on Sundays. We children enjoyed all the different social activities provided by the little country school--Christmas plays and programs, the programs honoring the birthdays of Washington and Lincoln, and picnics. Then as we grew older,

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the "box socials" were very special events. Each girl would be required to prepare an especially tasty luncheon, which she could attractively package and decorate. Then the young men would bid on these nicely-packaged luncheons. Then they would sit and share the lunch they had bought with the girl who had provided it--with the money earned going toward the purchase of books for the school library. House, community, and barn-raising dances were fun, too. When my brothers and sisters became older, they had a little orchestra of their own, providing music for these dances. Harvest time was very busy with the women preparing and serving large dinners for the hard-working and hungry threshers.

SOCHAN: Were there any problems faced in farming at the time?

TOMASTICK: Those long-ago years of pioneers farming were very primitive before the time of electrical power--and practically all hard labor. But the greatest hardship was the many years of crop failure because of drought, too much moisture, hail damages, the many years for early frost.

SOCHAN: Did any of your brothers serve in any of the wars?

TOMASTICK: One of my brothers served overseas in the World War I and was a casualty of that war. The youngest brother served in the Pacific area in World War II.

SOCHAN: Okay. Tell me a little bit about your marriage ceremony and describe it a little bit to us.

TOMASTICK: On September 29, 1903, at the age of seventeen, I was married in a simple, little country ceremony, and Anna Tkach became Mrs. Andrew Tomastick. We immediately came by train to Joliet where my husband joined

his brother in his grocery and meat market business. We lived in Joliet in 1903 and 1904. This was the period of remembering being the time of another World's Fair in 1904 in St. Louis, Missouri.

SOCHAN: Okay. Tell me a little about the type of grocery store that you operated.

TOMASTICK: Some of the interesting things of the early 1900's could include such items as small-scale merchandising. To attract customers, such small merchants made home deliveries by horse and buggy to housewives two times each day. The morning trip delivered the order from the previous day and also took the order for the afternoon delivery. At that time the small railroad station in Joliet was on ground level, as well as the railroad tracks. Joliet had streetcar service for local transportation, which also went to Lockport. Much of Joliet was undeveloped then; and we enjoyed long walks which included a lovely, wooded, northeast section. We did not know then that 23 years later we would return to "Forest Park."

SOCHAN: In 1904 where did you move to from Joliet?

TOMASTICK: At the end of 1904 we moved to the village of my birth, Central City. Here my husband worked in the mine until 1909. When the gas-filled mine almost resulted in his death, it took almost two years before he regained his health. There was no such thing as Workmen's Compensation or any type of help from owners of the mine or from the government. As his health and strength improved, he helped with the work on his brother's farm in Central City. The first of our three children was born in Central City in 1907.

SOCHAN: Were there any tragedies faced in your family?

TOMASTICK: In 1911 we moved farther south in Illinois to the little village of Taylor Springs. My uncle had established a good-sized, general store in this young, booming, coal-mining and smelter community. My husband came to help him, and soon after, to start up his own draying business--to serve the people and the few places of business in this small village and the nearby towns. After his near-death experience in the mine, it was important to him to work out-of-doors. Our great sadness was the death of our beautiful little seven-year-old girl from diptheria.

SOCHAN: Okay. Tell me of some of the social events that took place.

TOMASTICK: Our other two daughters were born in Taylor Springs. My married sisters came to Taylor Springs later. These were young families growing together for many years in a simple and peaceful village. The countryside was filled in season with wild strawberries, blackberries, persimmons, black walnuts, hazelnuts, hickory nuts, butternuts, and beautiful wild flowers. We had large relative and family picnics in the country at Red Bridge--first going by horse and wagon; then later, other relatives got cars. These were original "cook-outs" on a large scale. Uncle prepared what he called "Mulligan Stew"; and the women all provided their various specialities, including all kinds of bakery. These were the years when weddings and christenings were occasions for large, banquet-type dinners for families and friends. For these, I made many a three-layered sponge cake, all beaten by hand with only a fork. I continued to do much sewing for my daughters, sisters, and friends.

SOCHAN: What type of small jobs or errands did you enjoy doing for others?

TOMASTICK: Although on a small scale, I took care of the book work of my

husband's little livery-dray business and also wrote out the Sears-Roebuck mail orders for the women in Taylor Springs who couldn't do so for themselves--also took those to a doctor who I decided needed it or someone to interpret for them. In the first years of marriage in Central City, my husband and his brothers played the violin for dances. Lodge dances and banquets were popular those days in Taylor Springs. Streetcar service provided transportation to the stately county seat of Hillsboro nearby. Our few trips were to my parents' home in Minnesota by train.

SOCHAN: In 1920 tell me about the great happening of the automobile coming in.

TOMASTICK: About 1920 in Taylor Springs the automobile began replacing the horse and buggy. Also, the miners experienced great problems with the mine owners who closed the mine, which meant the ruin of that community for the working man. In those years there was no government help in places of little or no employment.

SOCHAN: Tell me a little about your husband's occupation.

TOMASTICK: My husband's brothers were living in Joliet; and with the prospect of work at the E. J. & E., we moved to Joliet in 1926. My husband helped build, in the then very peaceful and pleasant Forest Park area, a small house with adjoining small area for a little business. He worked at the E. J. & E.; and I took care of our small candy, school supplies, notions, and confectionery store with the help of my two young daughters. The little store might have been called the children's community center. During those depression years the children had only a penny or two, and it was very long and serious business what they selected.

They were full of life and fun,but not destructive. They enjoyed themselves with little, as most children before them have. Few had bicycles, wagons, and skates; and there were no sidewalks for skating anyway. The few gifts received at Christmas lasted and were used for years, and handed down to others, as was clothing. The beautiful creek, woods, and canyon of Hickory Creek about a mile east was a favorite all-year-round playground. Now, even a grownup would not dare to go there. The few streetcars in Joliet's public transportation were being taken over by bus service. Children and adults often walked to and from town, a distance of three miles each way. None, even girls,had any reason to fear walking--either day or night.

SOCHAN: How many days a week did your husband work; and after his retirement, what did he enjoy most?

TOMASTICK: For a number of years my husband worked two or three days a week at the "J", and was grateful he had that at the low labor wage. He never had a car, and always walked to and from work, working out-of-doors, retiring at the age of 75. I, having had a health problem, discontinued my little business in 1941. After a few months of retirement, my husband became restless and was urged by our elderly, working neighbor to join him at his place of employment. This he did and continued working until age 80, still in excellent health. For the next 12 years he enjoyed active retirement being busy in his large yard and garden, reading, watching television, walking, and visiting his friends and relatives. He was proud of his "Citizen Papers", which he obtained as a young, single man in Central City. He lived a happy and busy 92 years. We would have been married 60 years the month following his death.

SOCHAN: Tell me about the home furnishings you had in your house.

TOMASTICK: Our food and furnishings and belongings have always been the simple and necessary essentials. However, when the hand-fired furnace took the place of our stove heater in 1928, my husband was very proud; and our first little gas stove, which we still have, was bought when we came to Joliet in 1926. It was a real miracle to me when our furnace was converted to gas. My husband was very happy too. When the Forest Park area finally got city water and sewer--in the early 1950's--this meant one of the greatest benefits to us in being able to have a modest but convenient kitchen and bathroom.

SOCHAN: Were there any hardships faced during the depression of 1930?

TOMASTICK: I was happy to have attended the third World's Fair familiar to me--the one in Chicago in 1933. I also enjoyed a few train and bus trips to Chicago to the loop area, to a few stage shows and to dinner in the Chicago downtown area. The depression of the early 1930's was an orderly time of making do with little or nothing. There was much unemployment, but the government helped through providing some work with the WPA and CC programs. Purchase of food was limited through government rationing and the scarcity of money, but everyone managed quietly. Both the first and second world wars brought personal and economic hardships to each family--illness, death, and strict but orderly rationing, and lawfulness. There was a very severe flu epidemic during World War I. I was one of those ill but fortunate to recover.

SOCHAN: Did anyone in your family take part in any politics of any sort?

TOMASTICK: Although we did not take an active part in politics, both my husband and I had always been interested in local, national, and world affairs. When we discontinued our little business, the store area was used as a precinct for voting as it was centrally located in that area. . . . My two single daughters and I live together, and they provide for my needs and care.

SOCHAN: Were there any crises in your life?

TOMASTICK: Like most families' lives ours has had its share of happiness, hardships, and heartaches. My husband was spared the greatest crisis. His life had not been easy coming here alone as a very young immigrant from Czechoslovakia. He peacefully endured and/or overcome the handicaps of all ethnic society. He could not have imagined for this nation today's violence and evil--and the unjust suffering of innocent people. For God's creation is so big and His world of nature so beautiful, there surely must be in the future peace and good.

SOCHAN: Okay. I would like to thank you very much for this interview and I really enjoyed talking with you. Thank you very much.

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